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ABSTRACT

Researchers surveyed 78 clients in drug abuse treatment facilities to determine their perceptions regarding factors related to their use and abuse of drugs. About 40% of the sample began using drugs between 11 and 15 years of age. Males tended to begin using drugs at an earlier age than did females. Over 90% of participants reported using drugs with other people to help in relaxation and in coping with life's stresses. In addition, approximately 75% indicated that other family members abused drugs. Findings, obtained from clients in drug abuse treatment centers, may enhance counselors' understanding of factors related to drug use and abuse. Contains eight tables. (Author)

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Drug Abusers' Perceptions of Factors Related to Drug Abuse

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, November 9-11, 1994.

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Abstract

We surveyed 78 clients in drug abuse treatment facilities to determine their perceptions regarding factors related to their use and abuse of drugs. About 40% of our sample began using drugs between 11 and 15 years of age. Males tended to begin using drugs at an earlier age than did females. Over 90% of participants reported using drugs with other people to help in relaxation and in coping with life's stresses. In addition, approximately 75% indicated that other family members abused drugs. Our findings, obtained from clients in drug abuse treatment centers, may enhance counselors' understanding of factors related to drug use and abuse.

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An estimated 36-43 million people in the U.S. are believed to be dependent on alcohol or other drugs, with an estimated 10-13 million of those being alcoholics (Clinard & Meir, 1992). Alcohol and drug abuse is not benign, but, rather, can cause problems in all areas of a person's life, influencing one's physical and psychological health, social relationships with family and friends, in the work place, and society in general (Bootzin & Acocella, 1992). Educational institutions at lower and at higher levels report numerous problems with alcohol and other drugs among their students, teachers, and staff members (Livitov, Thompson, & Miederhoff, 1981). In general, an estimated 50 to 60 million people are affected by alcoholism either directly or indirectly (Emner, 1993). Problems involved with alcohol and drug abuse have become so widespread that President Clinton recently (March 31, 1994) signed into law **Goals 2000: Educate America Act** of which one objective is, "Every school in the United States will be free of drugs...and alcohol..."

Numerous explanations have been proffered for alcohol and drug abuse. In the psychodynamic perspective, alcoholism is seen as a symptom of an unconscious emotional problem whereas in the neuroscience view, alcoholism is genetic in origin. A social learning approach argues that persons who abuse drugs are shaped to do so by their peers and family members though modeling, norms, and expectations (Newcomb & Ortiz, 1992). Related to the social learning approach is the sociocultural perspective which suggests that peer associations have a strong influence on alcohol consumption (Bootzin & Acocella, 1988). Finally, peer cluster theory (Oetting & Beauvais, 1987) involves the notion that drug use and abuse is linked to peer relationships. That is, "peers have attitudes about drugs, may provide drugs, may provide the social context for drug use, and may share ideas and beliefs that become the rationales for drug use. These groups may consist of a gang or a small group of friends, or they may be dyads such as best friends or couple. These close and highly influential groups are peer clusters, and within drug-using peer clusters, drugs play an important part in defining the group, shaping its typical behaviors, and maintaining the group identity and structure" (Oetting & Beauvais, 1987; p. 206).

Evidence (Needle et al., 1986; Swaim et al., 1989; Farrell, 1993) exists to support the peer cluster theory as a viable explanation for drug use and abuse. For example, 92% of a sample of Iowa twelfth graders, when asked how many had experimented with alcohol, responded that they had done so before the age of 14. Reasons given for using drugs were: to help them forget about their problems or unhappiness; because their families and friends use drugs; they liked the way it made them feel; and, they did not see any thing wrong with it (Iowa, 1987-88).

In the present study, we surveyed 78 clients in drug abuse treatment facilities to determine their perceptions regarding factors related to their use and abuse of drugs.

Method

Sample

All participants were undergoing treatment for substance abuse in one of five different Arkansas treatment facilities in 1994. The average amount of time participants had been in the 30-day treatment programs was 9 days. Participants were 58 males and 17 females, with 3 persons failing to provide this information. Fifty persons were Caucasian, 17 were African American, and 2 were Hispanic, with 9 persons not responding to this question. Ages of participants ranged from 15 to 59, with a mean age of 30.2 years (*SD* = 10.6). Educational level ranged from 13% of our sample having less than a high school education, 33.8% with some high school experience, 13% with some college education, and 33.8% with either a high school diploma or a GED. Most of our sample were either single, 46.8%, or divorced, 33.8%.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedure

Data were collected through use of the Alcoholism Treatment Survey (Emner, 1993) which was modified for the purposes of this study. Items on the questionnaire assess nine areas: (1) demographics; (2) drug usage; (3) peers; (4) family; (5) employment; (6) society; (7) health; (8) quitting; and (9) treatment facility. The actual questionnaire utilized in the study is shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results

Almost 40% of our sample began experimenting with alcohol and/or other drugs between the ages of 11 to 15, with another 38.5% beginning to use drugs between the ages of 16-20. Over 50% of participants chose a mixture of alcohol and illegal drugs as their substances of choice, in comparison to only 1.3% who used illegal drugs only or who abused prescription drugs only or who used illegal and prescription drugs in combination. Over 90% reported that they had used drugs with other people, as compared to only 7.8% who reported always using drugs by themselves. Participants indicated that drugs helped them to cope (16.9%), helped them to relax (13.0%), made them feel better (10.4%), or a combination of these factors. Only 27.3% of our sample reported that using drugs had caused them problems. Congruent with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders--IIIR (DSM-III-R) which indicates that alcoholism is a disease (Morse & Flavin, 1992), over half of our sample, 56.0%, agreed with this premise. Thirty-three percent thought they had a problem that had gotten out of control, with 8.0% indicating a combination of the disease and problem explanations for alcoholism. Interestingly, a small percentage, 2.7, indicated that they did not have a problem, even though they were in a treatment facility for drug abuse.

Insert Table 3 about here

A stepwise discriminant analysis was conducted to determine more clearly variables that might be predictive of age of drug use. Respondents were classified into two groups on the basis of age at which they reported using alcohol or other drugs. This classification resulted in 35 persons aged 15 years and below and 30 persons aged 16 and above. The resulting discriminant function was statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 12.42$, $p < .05$, although accounting for only 5.3% of the variance (i.e., eigenvalue = .23). Individual items that discriminated between these two groups were the nature of the drug used (see substances used in Table 3); whether a family member was addicted to drugs; respondents' sex; and, whether the respondent had lied about using drugs. Males were more likely to abuse drugs at an earlier age than were females. Alcohol was typically the initial drug abused by respondents.

Of the 78 participants, 66 (85.7%) reported that their peers also used drugs. The majority, 61.5%, believed that their peers would not avoid them if they quit using drugs, although 20.5% of respondents indicated that their peers would not associate with them if they quit using drugs. Members of the family were reported by 74% of respondents to be addicted to drugs, with fathers and brothers being the ones most likely to be addicted. Almost 90% reported that they had experienced problems with other family members because of their substance abuse.

Insert Tables 4 and 5 about here

When asked about health-related problems, 53.2% indicated that their health had been affected negatively by drugs. A third of our sample had reported having been physically abused as a child, with 10.5% indicating that they had been sexually abused as a child.

Insert Table 6 about here

Next, participants were surveyed regarding their perceptions of how they were treated by others. Most (93.5%) felt that others cared about them, that others treated them fairly (80%), that other people were concerned about their substance abuse (92.3%), and that other people would treat them better following treatment for drug abuse (62.9%). Only 37.3% indicated that they thought that people felt sorry for them. Finally, 60.3% of participants reported that other people did not understand them.

Insert Table 7 about here

Almost all respondents (97.3%) realized that it was important for them to refrain from using drugs, with most (64%) stating they were very confident of their ability to remain drug free. Respondents (87.2%) reported that they knew what it would take for them to refrain from using drugs. These ranged from a belief in God (18.4%) and a reliance on Alcoholics Anonymous (10.5%) to a combination of factors.

Insert Table 8 about here

Discussion

Our findings are congruent with the extant research literature. First, our sample, obtained from persons at treatment facilities, was comprised of more males than females. This finding is in agreement with studies that report that men abuse alcohol and drugs more so than do women (Clinard & Meier, 1992). About 40% of our sample began using drugs between 11 and 15 years of age, with males tending to begin using drugs at an earlier age than did females. These findings are similar to those reported by Pascale and Sylvester (1993) who found that the mean age for first experimentation with substance for males is 13.05 and the mean for females was 13.45.

Similar to Taricone and Janikowski (1990), over half of our sample reported a belief that alcoholism was a disease. With this attribution toward cause as well as the finding that 18% of the respondents reported "God" will help them remain drug free, a tendency exists on the part of participants to view alcohol and drug abuse as external to their control. Even so, almost two-thirds of this group were confident they would cease alcohol and/or drug abuse activities upon leaving treatment.

The majority of our respondents reported extensive involvement with peers in their use of drugs. Over 90% of participants reported using drugs with other people to help in relaxation and in coping with life's stresses. In this study, a father, mother, aunt or uncle having an addiction was reported by over 95% of respondents. This fact suggests the social learning impact of inappropriate ways of coping among family members. Likewise, over 85% of respondents claimed their peers used drugs but only 20% feared being isolated if they stopped taking drugs. These findings provide evidence for sociological theories and the peer cluster theory (Oetting & Beauvais, 1987) which argue that people who use drugs associate with others who use alcohol or other drugs (Pascale & Sylvester, 1988; Iannotti, 1992; Buchanan, 1990; Oetting, 1987).

Respondents' perceived level of social support was high as 93% believed others cared about them and 80% perceived they were treated fairly by others. Interesting, however, was the finding that one-third of the sample perceived others would treat them worse after leaving treatment. Lack of communication with family or significant others may have been a problem as only 39% of the sample felt others understood them.

Finally, for counselors working with students experiencing such problems in the schools, we found that 82% of our sample reported that a direct and confronting counseling approach had the most positive impact on their

treatment and 95% of respondents believed their treatment was helpful or very helpful. This finding supports other studies regarding effective counseling strategies for working with persons experiencing alcohol and drug abuse problems (Nace, 1987).

In summary, these findings, obtained from clients in drug abuse treatment centers, may enhance counselors' understanding of factors related to drug use and abuse. Counseling, designed to enhance students' ability to withstand peer pressure to use drugs, may be especially effective as less than 10% of our sample used drugs by themselves. In addition, counselors need to be aware that drug use by one family member may be predictive of drug use by another family member.

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Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants.

	n	%age
Gender		
Males	58	77.3
Females	17	22.7
Ages		
15 to 30 years	36	50.0
31 to 45 years	32	37.0
46 to 60 years	8	13.0
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	50	64.9
African American	17	22.1
Hispanic	2	2.6
Highest Education		
Less than high school	10	13.0
Some high school	26	33.8
Some college	10	13.0
High school or GED	26	33.8
Bachelor's degree	3	3.9
Master's degree	2	2.6
Marital Status		
Single	36	46.8
Married	9	11.7
Separated	5	6.5
Divorced	26	33.8
Children		
Yes	47	60.3
No	29	37.2
Living Status		
Alone	34	44.2
With parents	16	20.8
With friend	10	13.0
With spouse	13	16.9
Other	4	5.2

Table 2
Perception Questionnaire Used in Study.

1. **Gender:** 1. Male 2. Female
2. **Age:** _____
3. **Race:** 1. Native American 2. Asian 3. African American 4. Hispanic 5. White
4. **Marital Status:** 1. Single 2. Married 3. Separated 4. Divorced 5. Widowed
5. **Do you have any children?** 1. yes 2. no
6. **Highest Education Earned** (Circle one):
   1. Less than high school 2. Some high school but not completed
   3. Some College 4. Completed high school or equivalency
   5. Bachelor's degree 6. Master's
8. **Employment** (Circle all that apply):
   1. Unemployed
   2. Employed part-time (job title): _____
   3. Employed full-time (job title): _____
   4. Self-employed (job title): _____
   5. Homemaker 6. Student 7. Retired
9. **Your Income** (yearly):
   1. Less than $10,000.
   2. $10,000. - $19,999.
   3. $20,000. - $29,999.
   4. $30,000. - $39,999.
   5. $40,000. - and above
10. **Family Income** (yearly):
   1. Less than $10,000.
   2. $10,000. - $19,999.
   3. $20,000. - $29,999.
   4. $30,000. - $39,999.
   5. $40,000. - and above
11. **Main source of income:**
   1. Self 2. Family 3. Spouse 4. Friend 5. Welfare
   6. Disability 7. Retirement 8. Other (explain): _____
12. **Living Situation:**
   1. Live alone 2. Live with parents 3. Live with friends
   4. Live with spouse 5. Other (explain): _____
13. **Age you started drinking or using other drugs:**
   1. Age 10 or less 2. Age 11 to 15 3. Age 16 to 20
   4. Age 21 to 25 5. Age 26 to 30 6. Age 31 to 35
   7. Age 36 to 40 8. Age 41 to 45 9. Age 46 to 50
   10. Age 51 to 55 11. Age 56 to 60 12. Over 61
14. **What substance(s) did you use?**
   1. Alcohol only 2. Illegal drugs only 3. Prescription drugs
   4. Alcohol and illegal drugs 5. Alcohol and prescription
   6. Illegal and prescription drugs 7. Other (explain): _____
15. **What was your typical use pattern?**
   1. Always alone 2. Sometimes with other people
   3. About half the time with other people
   4. Most of the time with other people 5. Always with other people
16. **Do most of your friends use alcohol or other drugs?**
   1. Yes 2. No
17. **Of the friends that use alcohol or other drugs with you, do you think they will spend as much time with you if you stop using alcohol or other drugs?** 1. Yes 2. No 3. I don't know how they will react.
18. **Do you know what you need to do in order to stop taking drugs/alcohol?**
   1. Yes 2. No 3. Other (explain): _____
19. **What did alcohol or other drugs do for you?**
   1. Helped me relax 2. Helped me cope with life
   3. Caused problems 4. Nothing 5. Feel better about myself
20. **Do you believe that you have a disease or a problem that just got out of control?**
   1. Disease 2. Problem that got out of control
   3. Alcohol or other drugs are not a problem for me
21. **Have you ever lied about using alcohol or other drugs?** 1. Yes 2. No
22. **If yes, did other people believe you?** 1. Yes 2. No

23. **Has alcohol or other drugs caused you any problems with your employer/job?** 1. Yes 2. No
24. **Has alcohol or other drugs caused you any problems in your relationships with other family members?** 1. Yes 2. No
25. **Do other people care about you?** 1. Yes 2. No
26. **Do other people treat you fairly?** 1. Yes 2. No
27. **Do other people feel sorry for you?** 1. Yes 2. No
28. **Do other people understand you?** 1. Yes 2. No
29. **Have you had any health problems because of your alcohol or other drug use?** 1. Yes 2. No
30. **Are or were any members of your immediate family addicted to alcohol or other drugs?** 1. Yes 2. No
    If yes, please specify which family member(s): _____
31. **Were you physically abused?** 1. Yes 2. No
32. **Were you sexually abused?** 1. Yes 2. No
33. **Are other people concerned about your alcohol or other drug problem?**
    1. Yes 2. No 3. I don't have a problem with alcohol or drugs
34. **Have you ever been treated for alcohol or other drugs before you came to this treatment facility?** 1. Yes 2. No
    If yes, how many times? _____
35. **How long have you been in this facility?** ____ months ____ days
36. **Who suggested or made you enter this treatment facility?**
    1. Spouse 2. Friend 3. Child/Children 4. Other family
    5. Employer 6. Judge 7. Counselor/Therapist
    8. Medical Doctor 9. Self 10. Member of clergy
    11. Crisis Hotline 13. Other: _____
37. **Which of the following has ever stopped you from seeking treatment?**
    1. No money 2. No insurance 3. No child care
    4. No transportation 5. Problems with child/children
    6. Problems with spouse 7. Problems with friends
    8. Fear of losing job 9. Fear of rejection by others in your life
    10. Fear of losing child(ren) 11. Not knowing who to ask for help
    12. Unaware that I had a problem 13. I don't have a problem
    14. Fear of what other people would think
38. **How helpful is your current treatment?**
    1. Not helpful 2. Sightly helpful 3. Helpful
    4. Very helpful
39. **Why or how is it helping you? Please explain:** _____
40. **How do the staff at this treatment facility treat you?**
    1. They genuinely care and want to help me recover
    2. They look down on me 3. They are just doing their job
41. **What type of counseling approach has made a positive impact in your recovery?**
    1. A direct confronting approach 2. A non-direct caring approach
    3. No approach has been useful 4. Other (explain) _____
42. **When you leave this treatment facility, will you remain alcohol/drug free?**
    1. Very Confident 2. Unsure 3. Not going to remain drug free
43. **After you leave treatment do you think other people will treat you the same as they did before treatment?**
    1. I will be treated better 2. I will be treated the same
    3. I will be treated worse
44. **Does your family/friends believe that treatment will help you quit using alcohol or other drugs?**
    1. Yes 2. No 3. Don't know **If no, why?** _____
45. **What is the single most important factor which will keep you drug/alcohol free when you leave this treatment facility?**
    1. AA 2. My family 3. My friends 4. My will power
    5. God 6. Spouse 7. My children 8. Other (explain) _____
46. **How important is it for you to succeed in quitting drugs/alcohol use?**
    1. Very important 2. Unsure about future 3. Not important

Table 3
Participants' Responses to Drug Use Questions.

	n	%age
Age you started using?		
10 or less	9	11.5
11-15	31	39.7
16-20	30	38.5
21-25	3	3.8
26-30	4	5.1
31-35	0	0.0
36-40	1	1.3
What substances do you use?		
Alcohol only	18	23.1
Illegal drugs only	1	1.3
Prescription drugs	1	1.3
Alcohol and illegal drugs	41	52.6
Alcohol and prescription drugs	4	5.1
Illegal and prescription drugs	1	1.3
Other	12	15.4
Pattern of use?		
Always alone	6	7.8
Sometimes alone	18	23.4
About half the time w/others	19	24.7
Most of the time w/others	21	27.3
Always w/other people	11	14.3
Other	2	2.6
What do alcohol and other drugs do for you?		
Helped me to relax	10	13.0
Helped me to cope	13	16.9
Caused problems	21	27.3
Nothing	1	1.3
Feeling better, self esteem	8	10.4
Combination	24	31.2
Lied about use?		
Yes	67	87.0
No	10	13.0
Did others believe you?		
Yes	37	60.7
No	24	39.3
Do you have a disease or an out of control problem?		
Disease	42	56.0
Problem	25	33.3
Combination	6	8.0
Do not have a problem	2	2.7

Table 4
Participants' Perceptions Related to Peers.

	n	%age
Peer usage?		
Yes	66	85.7
No	11	14.3
Peer avoidance after treatment?		
Yes	16	20.5
No	48	61.5
Do Not Know	12	15.4

Table 5
Participants' Perceptions Regarding Their Families.

	n	%age
Problems with family members?		
Yes	67	89.3
No	8	10.7
Family member addiction?		
Yes	56	74.7
No	19	25.3
Which Family Member Has An Addiction?		
Mother	15	
Father	24	
Brother	25	
Sister	7	
Grandmother	6	
Grandfather	13	
Aunt	4	
Uncle	13	
Spouse	3	

Table 6
Participants' Responses to Health and Abuse Questions.

	n	%age
Health-related problems		
Yes	41	53.2
No	36	46.8
Were you physically abused as a child?		
Yes	25	33.3
No	50	66.7
Were you sexually abused as a child?		
Yes	8	10.5
No	68	89.5

Table 7
Perceptions of Treatment by Others.

	n	%age
Do others care about you?		
Yes	72	93.5
No	5	6.5
Do others treat you fairly?		
Yes	60	80.0
No	15	20.0
Do others feel sorry for you?		
Yes	25	37.3
No	42	62.7
Do others understand you?		
Yes	27	39.7
No	41	60.3
Are others concerned about your substance abuse?		
Yes	72	92.3
No	3	3.8
I do not have a problem	3	3.8
After treatment, will others treat you the same?		
Better	44	62.9
Worse	24	34.3
Same	2	2.9
Does your family have confidence in your treatment?		
Yes	51	65.4
No	5	6.4
Do not know	19	24.4

Table 8
Participants' Responses to Quitting Drug Abuse.

	n	%age
How important is it for you to quit?		
Very important	73	97.3
Unsure about future	2	2.7
Not at all	3	3.8
How likely to you think you will remain drug free?		
Very confident	48	64.0
Not sure	25	33.3
Not going to remain drug free	2	2.7
Do you know what it will take for you to get off substances?		
Yes	68	87.2
No	6	7.7
Other	3	3.8
What will help you remain free?		
Alcoholics Anonymous	8	10.5
Family	6	7.9
God	14	18.4
Spouse	1	1.3
Other or Combination	47	61.8